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Viewing cable 06MANAGUA281, BOILING THE FROG": HOW THE SANDINISTAS HAVE

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Understanding cables

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- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

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If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#06MANAGUA281**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06MANAGUA281	2006-02-06 19:31	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-30/Mundo/NotasSecundarias/Mundo2758456.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-30/Mundo/NotasSecundarias/Mundo2758467.aspx>
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<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-23/Mundo/Relacionados/Mundo2758764.aspx>
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<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-16/Mundo/NotasSecundarias/Mundo2757239.aspx>
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<http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/3991/dra-yadira-centeno-desmiente-cable-diplomatico-eeuu>
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<http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/3967/barreto-era-ldquo-fuente-confiable-rdquo-para-eeuu>

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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0538
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAGUA 000281

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DEPT FOR WHA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/03/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [KCOR](#) [NU](#)
SUBJECT: "BOILING THE FROG": HOW THE SANDINISTAS HAVE
COOKED THE CSE

Classified By: Ambassador Paul Trivelli for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) Summary: A former top official in Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) recently described to Emboffs the seamier side of the CSE -- an organization he claims is riddled with corruption and fraudulent partisan influence from top to bottom. In addition to blatant financial fraud and mismanagement, ex-Director of Cedulation (issuance of national/voter ID's) Dionisio Palacios reported illegal and selective issuance of cedula, problems with multiple voting, and the effective subordination of the CSE to the Sandinista Front (FSLN). In a separate meeting, current CSE senior civil servant Rodrigo Barreto asserted that Palacios' claims are not credible and explained CSE strategies for issuing cedula and registering voters. While Palacios clearly has a bone to pick with the CSE, many of his accusations confirm reports from other contacts and depict an institution that has abandoned virtually all independence and credibility. End Summary.

BOILING THE FROG
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12. (C) One way to cook a frog is to place it in a pot of cool, comfortable water. To avoid having the frog jump to safety, the water must heat slowly, without the frog realizing the increasing mortal danger -- until it is cooked and ready to eat. On February 1, former CSE Director of Cedulation Dionisio Palacios reported a very similar scenario at the CSE, with the FSLN in the role of the chef; the PLC, the frog. Palacios informed us that he had worked for the CSE in various positions since 1994 and observed a trend of increasing partisanship and politicization. He claimed that, despite the theoretically even division of positions between the PLC and FSLN, virtually all technical-level functionaries at the CSE are FSLN militants, while Liberal employees have been gradually sidelined and very few continue to have any real function or control (but continue to receive a salary). When asked point blank if there are any honest people left at the CSE, Palacios responded, "Honestly, no."

13. (C) We asked Palacios why CSE president Roberto Rivas, supposedly a Liberal magistrate, has allowed this Sandinista take-over and continues to side with FSLN magistrates against the Liberals on many issues. Palacios explained that Rivas is implicated in several cases of financial malfeasance from his time at the CSE (this is his third consecutive term) and before, about which the Sandinistas are aware and are ready to exploit through the Sandinista-controlled courts should Rivas displease them. According to Palacios, PLC leader Arnoldo Aleman recognized Rivas' increasingly compromised

situation and plotted to have him replaced when Rivas' term expired in 2005. However, Rivas' mentor (and rumored father) Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo intervened with Aleman to save Rivas' position. The FSLN also lobbied Aleman to retain Rivas as part of the PLC-FSLN pact to divide the spoils in pact-controlled government institutions.

CSE BUDGET WOES CAUSED BY RIVAS' MISMANAGEMENT

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¶4. (C) The CSE once operated offices in all 152 municipalities and issued cédulas in a relatively timely manner. In 2003, the budget of the Cedulation office was cut, and the office was no longer able to purchase sufficient materials to issue cédulas efficiently -- a problem that has only worsened over time. In 2004, the CSE closed most of the municipal offices, again for budget reasons, leaving only the central offices and 18 outposts in the departmental/regional capitals open to serve the public. Rivas complains that the Bolanos Administration is starving the CSE of funds for political reasons, but according to Palacios, Rivas has diverted massive amounts of money to increase benefits for magistrates, including drivers, bodyguards, and lavish expense accounts. Palacios also claims Rivas has allotted chief CSE functionary Rodrigo Barreto an "emergency fund" that Barreto supposedly abuses. When asked about financial responsibility, Palacios said that Rivas bribes the external auditors to accept internal audit reports without question. The executive cannot force the CSE to open its books because it is an independent branch of government, allowing Rivas to allocate funds as he pleases.

FSLN USES CONTROL OF CSE TO MANIPULATE CEDULA ISSUANCE

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¶5. (C) Palacios confirmed reports that Sandinista employees at the CSE are issuing cédulas for under-age (under 16) Nicaraguans and foreigners based on falsified birth certificates. He said this type of fraud is also facilitating trafficking in persons and drugs. Palacios stated that both the FSLN and PLC use whatever control they have in the municipalities and electoral councils to facilitate cédulas for their own party militants and delay or block cedula issuance for others. He noted that the mayors are in charge of the civil registries in the municipalities, and therefore control the issuance of birth certificates, required to obtain cédulas. The CSE in general does nothing to encourage or facilitate the registration of 16-year olds (112,000 Nicaraguans come of age each year), Palacios claimed; rather, the political parties play that role.

¶6. (C) Palacios explained that, in addition to the new registrants, 250,000 Nicaraguans file claims for damaged or lost cédulas each year. He said that 150,000 cédulas have been produced, but not distributed, and the CSE will probably not make any effort to do so. The FSLN magistrates will absolutely oppose any "plan mochila" proposed by NGOs to distribute cédulas in remote areas because they recognize that these efforts enfranchised primarily Liberal and independent voters in past elections, Palacios claimed.

¶7. (U) During an earlier meeting, Barreto told us that the CSE is planning projects to speed up the cedulation process and allow voters to register at the polling place of their choice. According to Barreto, the CSE will open new centers in Managua and cut down the cedula processing time to 24 hours, as well as make a greater effort to issue cédulas in other municipalities. He complained that the GON procurement system is ridiculously bureaucratic and contributed to the delay in cedula issuance. He also claimed that the cedula problem "is greatly inflated" by the CSE's political rivals.

MULTIPLE VOTING NOT DIFFICULT

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¶8. (C) Personally, Palacios believes that the CSE does not have the right to suspend or reform Article 41 of the electoral law, which allows citizens to vote at any location

if they have a valid cedula that shows they live in the area.

(Note: Article 41 is currently the subject of an intense debate, with the Liberal parties protesting CSE/FSLN-sponsored poll regulations that state that a voter must appear on the list allocated to a specific voting station. End Note.) However, he acknowledged that this law more easily allows people to vote multiple times. Palacios explained that a person could simply obtain a second birth certificate by using his father's last name in addition to or instead of his mother's, and then use the birth certificate to apply for a second cedula. Regarding the ink used to stain the fingers of voters to prevent this type of fraud, Palacios asserted that a person can put grease or a similar substance on his finger to block the absorption of the ink. Poll workers are supposed to clean the finger before applying the ink, but most are poorly trained and wipe the finger after the ink is applied, he explained.

19. (U) To alleviate the potential displacement caused by the suspension of Article 41, Barreto reported that the CSE will open voting tables on five Sundays in three different phases before November to allow citizens to register at the voting location of their choice. He explained that voters will be able to get a "verification document" from the CSE that will allow them to vote at their preferred location even if, for some reason, they do not appear in the padron on voting day -- thus avoiding the "raton loco" of the 2004 municipal elections. The CSE will initiate a media campaign, in conjunction with the NGO community, to inform voters of the registration process. When queried about the large number of deceased or absent voters on the padron and the possibility for fraud, Barreto demurred, claiming that the strong ink placed on voters, thumbs on election day would prevent the same person from voting twice (unless, of course, they grease their thumbs first).

EXPAT VOTING NOT IN THE CARDS THIS YEAR

10. (SBU) Barreto reported that casting votes from abroad would not be possible this year, though he personally supports the project. He claimed that the CSE's budget cannot support such an effort, nor is the civil registry

sufficiently organized to permit consular officers to verify applications. Barreto commented that the CSE has held several meetings with the MFA to discuss this issue, but that the MFA has yet to produce a true consular registry. In any case, Barreto argued that most eligible voters abroad already have a cedula and may return to Nicaragua to exercise their suffrage.

BARRETO AND PALACIOS MUTUALLY SUSPICIOUS

11. (C) When asked about the CSE's firing of Palacios last October, Barreto replied that Palacios and his office were under investigation for illegally "expediting" cedulas for a fee. At first, Barreto said that he wasn't sure if Palacios was personally involved in the scandal, but later added that Palacios was frustrated because he did not feel the PLC magistrates were supporting him and he stood to lose his "business." Regarding the veracity of Palacios, allegations against the CSE, Barreto admitted that he has ignored Palacios, charges, but would not afford them much credibility in any case. Barreto did admit, however, that Palacios "knew what was going on in Cedulation." Barreto told us that the new Director of Cedulation, Sergio Rayo, was sponsored by PLC magistrate Rene Herrera. He termed Rayo a "conscientious worker."

12. (C) To Palacios, Barreto is "a servant of Roberto Rivas" who has his sticky fingers in Rivas' CSE budget-engorged pockets. He advised us not to trust Barreto. Palacios informed us that Sergio Rayo is related to Rene Herrera, but was also part of the Sandinista intelligence apparatus during the 1980s. He said he could not confirm the current inclination of Rayo's loyalties.

COMMENT

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¶13. (C) The CSE magistrates' stubborn resistance to allowing IFES technical advisors to enter their shadowy domain lends credence to Palacios accusations of budgetary opacity and mismanagement. The Ambassador called Rivas on February 3 to discuss the CSE's intransigence, and Rivas assured him that IFES will receive a letter next week outlining what type of assistance the CSE requires from IFES, noting that voter education and communications are among the priorities. Rivas claimed he is also amenable to technical support. The Ambassador reiterated our commitment to helping him, the CSE and the electoral process, observing that it would be a tragedy if Rivas were the first CSE head to preside over a seriously flawed election.

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